



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: © Adelaide University

## Making the sentences sing: an interview with Anna Goldsworthy

Gillian Dooley

*Dr Anna Goldsworthy is one of Australia's foremost concert pianists, a founding member of the Seraphim Trio, and a Research Fellow of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide.*

*She is also a distinguished writer, the author of two books: Piano Lessons (2009), a memoir of her musical education and her relationship with her teacher, Eleonora Sivan; and Welcome to your New Life (2014), a memoir describing the arrival of her first child. She has adapted Piano Lessons for the stage, and also co-written a play with her father, Peter Goldsworthy, based on his novel Maestro (1989). She has also written many essays, including cultural and literary criticism.*

*Given my own interests in music and literature and how the two art forms intersect and overlap, Anna's dual career has always been an inspiration for me. I met her in her office at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide in November 2016.*

GD: Obviously the first thing I want to ask you about is writing about music. How does writing about music work? Because they're different languages.

AG: They are. And you have to cultivate ... you have to be somehow bilingual in order to be able to step across that divide. I think that for me writing about music is probably an extension of talking about music. And that's been a part of my life from an early age, I've been on the receiving end of talking about music from my brilliant teacher, or my own talking about music in my own teaching, and also my own concert presentations and program notes and things. I used to do a lot of program notes when I was doing my doctorate – I used to take a lot of program note assignments on board, partly because it gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in symphonic repertoire that wasn't necessarily what I was working on, but also I think it helped me find a way – a way – of writing about music, because in writing about music there are two major pitfalls. One is that it can be overly jargonistic, technical, which doesn't actually have that much interest to anybody. A blow by blow account of a

sonata, unless it's some really interesting high-end analysis that has interesting revelations – I'm not interested in reading those sorts of program notes because I can hear those sorts of processes. So I've never wanted to write that type. And then the other danger I suppose is writing overly purple prose about music. I always think it's like bad sex writing, it's just a bit embarrassing, it's a bit on the nose, and so trying to locate a vocabulary that somehow sits between those two extremes, that conveys – seeks to convey, it can only seek to convey some of it, because if it could convey it we wouldn't need music – so it seeks to convey the mystique and the magic and the transport of music. I've never wanted to entirely dismantle that entirely in my writing about music. But I've always sought to evoke it, without becoming maybe too mythologising or hifalutin, and it's hard.

When I think of the writers about music that I really enjoy, one is Neville Cardus, the cricket writer and music critic who lived in Sydney for a while. I really love his essay on Schubert. Actually it is really quite purple prose, but it's a type of prose poetry which in some ways is the best language for writing about music, it's lovely writing, and it's really insightful.

GD: So that's in *Ten Composers*.

AG: I mean, it's over the top, in that kind of high blown – you know if read the book that Liszt supposedly wrote with the help of his mistress about Chopin, it's very overblown and a heavy-breathing sort of romanticism, so it's a little bit like that but it's also – it gets to Schubert's essence, actually, in a not overly analytical way. He was self-educated, Neville Cardus, I mean he knows his stuff, but he's not getting stuck at the technical, he's actually seeking the poetic essence of Schubert.

GD: For me, the best music writing takes me back to the music.

AG: Oh, it has to. Not to the cleverness or the insight or anything of the person writing. It's got to – that's its job.

GD: Whether it's fiction or non-fiction. One of my favourite books about music is Vikram Seth's *An ...*

AG: ... *Equal Music*? Yes, it's interesting with that, because often when people write about music it seems that they don't really know it, but clearly he has immersed himself in the world of string quartets and he understands the psychodynamics of the string quartet and many of the intricacies of playing chamber music.

GD: Another writer I enjoy is Charles Rosen.

AG: I like Charles Rosen too. I really do. I think he's really intelligent and he writes – or wrote – from the perspective of a practising musician. And a lot of his insights in *Classical Style* or *Romantic Generation* are absolutely spot on. I mean things I hadn't really thought about

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properly before I read them in his work, about texture in Schubert and of course he's exactly right. I do think that a lot of the things he says are quite definitive.

GD: What else have you got there? (looking at the bookshelves).

AG: I've got *The Romantic Generation*. There's actually a little bit of a phenomenon of the pianist writer more than any other instrumentalist, I'd say. Rosen is one example. There's this woman, I have a little book by her, Susan Tomes, who was the pianist for the Florestan Trio. Jeremy Denk, an American pianist, is actually a very good writer. He's had some pieces in the *New Yorker* about learning to play the piano, and he's writing a pianist memoir now. I really like his writing. And I guess Alfred Brendal has written a bit. So there's something of a tradition of the pianist writer, more I'd say than the violinist writer or others.

GD: I wonder why that is?

AG: Maybe it's just a type of mindset, the type of person that's attracted to playing the piano. I think pianists do tend to be quite analytical. They're not necessarily as sociable or gregarious as their string colleagues. (laughter) They like to stay in little rooms by themselves with their instruments and think a lot. That's what they end up being like, I think, often.

GD: Sitting at a piano and sitting at a desk ...

AG: A keyboard of some description ...

GD: Then I was really interested, going sideways, to your review of the Russian books in the *Monthly*.<sup>1</sup>

AG: That was about [Svetlana] Alexievich. I loved those books. Have you read them? They're incredible.

GD: No, but your review made we want to read them.

AG: You've got to read them. They knocked my socks off. They're like nothing else on this planet. *Voices from Chernobyl* – I've never read anything like it. It got me in the solar plexus, really. They're astonishing.

GD: So how did you come to be reviewing those?

AG: The editor, Nick Feik, just sometimes sends me an email saying, here's a bunch of ideas, would you like to do anything? This television show, these books, whatever. And if there's

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Goldsworthy, 'Beyond imagination: Anna Goldsworthy on Svetlana Alexievich,' *Monthly* August 2016, 52-55.

something that piques my curiosity I say, OK. He absolutely brought me to them, and he said, if you're going to review *Secondhand Time* you should also read this one. So that's how that came about.

GD: You talk about how the book's form is governed as much by the laws of music as of drama, which I thought was an interesting comment.

AG: Yes, they were musical. They were like oratorios. I don't know to what extent the laws of music are different from the laws of drama. In many ways I think they are quite similar. And I know that in my own work for the stage – and I've done two plays now and a cabaret show – I think my own writing for the stage is governed by my structural sense and rhythmic sense, and the feeling for modulation and so on that a deep study of music equips you with. Understanding how things unfold over time, and I think it's something that's relevant to writing a long-form work of prose. That is also a temporal entity in the same way that a piece of music is a temporal entity, rather than a static thing like a painting. But I think what I was thinking about the Alexievich *Voices from Chernobyl* particularly was it almost reminded me of an opera or an oratorio – more an oratorio, actually – even in the way it was orchestrated, in the sense of – you'd have a chorus, then you'd have something that was clearly an aria, or a duet, the way she managed that, which is a really fundamental part of writing an opera libretto, is working out what goes where, and where you advance the story and where you linger, and all that sort of stuff.

GD: And recitative?

AG: Yeah, and recitative. She didn't have much recitative, really, in the sense of that ... well, I guess she did, in the sense that her voice kind of jumps in and takes you from one place to another. I mean, opera is really interesting. I was thinking this recently because someone asked me to adapt a play as a libretto, and the difference between the two forms. I think the thing about opera is it's often about the moment, and you need the recitative to get you to the moment, where you linger, whereas a play doesn't allow you that. I mean you talk about the Pinteresque moment and the silence and so on but it's kind of a different thing; in a play most things I think have to be justified according to how they advance the narrative or the action.

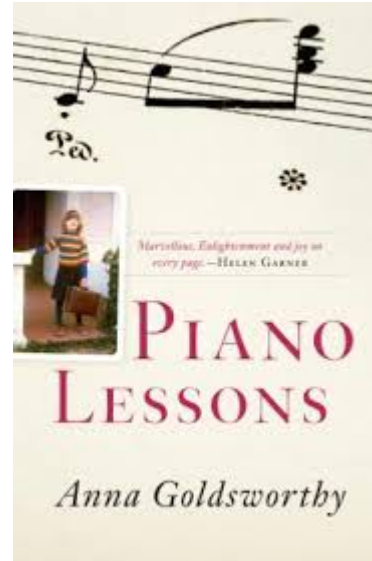
GD: What about soliloquies?

AG: Yeah, you're absolutely right, they're about dwelling on a moment, I guess they're the equivalent of an aria, they're just a more philosophical aria often.

GD: Maybe they don't occur so much in contemporary drama?

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AG: Yeah. I've found on the occasions I've worked with a dramaturge how ruthless the process is, at the end of every scene: what has this done to advance the action? And it's really interesting thing too when you adapt – both *Maestro* which I collaborated with Dad on adapting that for the stage,<sup>2</sup> and *Piano Lessons* – when you adapt a work of prose for the theatre, everything suddenly has to be less reflective, less internal, less internalised, and it's all this thing about action, and another really important thing in the theatre and certainly in the movies is that you need to have a character, a protagonist, who is active, if they are too passive somehow it doesn't work. And in *Piano Lessons*, for instance, my main character is pretty passive, she sits there and absorbs knowledge and practises a lot, and trying to work out how to translate that into a convincing dramatic character was a really interesting thing, and it's about that notion of action, I think, and movement, and opera – obviously that's a big part of opera, but what's so great about opera, what can opera give us that theatre can't, surely is it not those incandescent moments? And sometimes you have to go through a lot of ridiculous stuff and suspension of disbelief, and ludicrous story lines, just in order to get to that place of rapture. And that's what I love about opera.



GD: So when you write, even when you're not writing about music, do you feel musical patterns?

AG: I'm not actually sitting there thinking in a musical form, per se. I think feel whether a sentence sings. Sings is maybe an overstatement. I think Martin Amis speaks about the process of fine-tuning and editing as actually being like tuning – you know, fine tuning – and you have that with a piano tuner. It's the moment when you don't have beats in the sentence any more. And it's so intuitive, and you can't really articulate the processes, but I know when I've written a passage of prose and I'm reading it through, and I know when I've hit a snag, and it doesn't quite work. I think it's personal for everybody, what constitutes that snag, but we all have our own sense of ... our own music, and I sometimes think it's a bit like a certain chef has a master stock or something and we all have our own flavour. When I wrote *Piano Lessons* I gave it to my father to read. The first sentence in *Piano Lessons* is, 'It was my grandfather who found her.' And he changed that, he said, no, no, you should say, 'My grandfather found her.' It's more precise. I thought, OK, I'll try it, I put it there, and no.

GD: No, no!

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Goldsworthy's novel *Maestro* (1989) was adapted for the stage by Anna and premiered in Adelaide by the *State Theatre Company* in February 2009.

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AG: And there's nothing rational about it. I could justify why I had to say 'It was my grandfather who found her', because what does it do? It establishes a previous context, in a way. But it's not even just that. It's also the rhythm. And sometimes when I'm writing, I don't want to say that I write from the position of rhythm rather than meaning, because that would be terrible, but you do know sometimes there's a word that has to go there, and you kind of feel how many syllables it's got, and the rhythmic quality it's going to lend to that sentence, and you try something and finally you think, that's it!

GD: Do you ever write poetry?

AG: No, apart from in libretti, and making up poetry for my kids, but I love poetry and poetry is guided by those laws in the most pure form.

GD: Yes. I mean I've written two poems in my adult life, and one of them was just a week ago. There was two hours when I just could do nothing else but make this poem happen. And getting the last line – there's a word.

AG: You can kind of feel where that word is in space, can't you? It's kind of between that word and that word and just locating where it is. And it's a joy when you find it, I mean, that's the thrill. Did you find your word?

GD: I actually recast the sentence, because I ended up thinking that there isn't a word that will finish that.

AG: Poets often say that their poetry is often more found than laboured at, it exists and it just sort of ...

GD: Yes, but it is also really concentrated effort, really intense concentrated effort.

AG: Because there's no flab, no offcuts.

GD: And what about fiction?

AG: I'm actually trying to write some fiction at the moment. I don't know if I can or not. But that's what I'm attempting to do.

GD: Didn't you write some stories for the *Adelaide Review* in the late 1990s?

AG: Yeah, they were sort of nonfictionish. I kind of think most nonfiction is a little bit fictional. Certainly memoir is. I use novelistic techniques in my memoirs. And most fiction I'm sure contains some degree of memoir. So it's just a continuum really and now with this fiction I'm trying to write it's just a question of maybe advancing a little bit further towards fiction from memoir. I'm basing the stories I'm writing at the moment on stories my late grandmother

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told me. In retrospect she was a great story teller and she furnished me with all these gorgeous anecdotes, so I'm starting with them as the bare bones and creating a world around them. And in some ways it's not that dissimilar a process to retrieving – I mean, *Piano Lessons*, for instance, where I'm trying to find this world of childhood. I mean, it's different, it's a further step into the fictional camp. I mean, it's not a total change. If I were to sit down now and try to write speculative fiction or something utterly divorced from what I know that I think would be more of a departure.

GD: I love the way you write about learning music, and about teaching music, because it's something we've all been through, and you know the kind of patience that teachers have to have.

AG: It's incredible. It's out of this world. I mean, I do a bit of teaching here and I look back at the patience my teachers had ... it's a lot.

GD: I mean, I'm still going to singing lessons. I go along, and I think, 'I know you've told me this so many times, and I'm still repeating the mistakes'. Because it's training the body in a way ... it's not a matter of, I know that so I'll do that from now on.

AG: In some ways it's easier with a child because their bodies are more malleable and more plastic. To this day my technique is very relaxed at the piano and this is because my teacher somehow gave me my hands, and I still don't know how she did it, and I still don't know quite how to do it myself. It was very tactile. She was always holding my hands, she was always moulding them into shape. And I think it was also the sense of her utter uncanny fluency at the instrument. There's no sense of striving or working. Yet somehow she imparted that knowledge physically, as you say. And I often think of Pavarotti speaking about how he learnt how to breathe. And he said it was when he was in an opera with Joan Sutherland and she allowed him to wrap his arms around her diaphragm and just feel her breathing. And that to me is something of what it is to pass on this embodied knowledge. It's actually embodied knowledge. And you can understand it for sure, but how does one pass that on? It is in a way quite physical. And that's trick now. You're teaching piano in a tertiary institution, and you're not really supposed to be grabbing your students' hands and getting too physical with them, but it's hard not to, I think, it's hard to impart that aspect.

GD: It's even worse with a singer, probably.

AG: Very, yeah! I remember reading the Renee Fleming memoir, and I was so struck by the technical aspects of the singer's craft which I hadn't actually given that much thought to, and how precise she had to be – because it's also one thing to have that bodily knowledge and another thing to actually articulate that knowledge and pass it on to your students, and the way she was able to do that and the way she actually located these physical processes in her throat and her face and her chest and her body and everywhere, I thought, wow. It's so fine.

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But it's also like Yehudi Menuhin and his book, *Unfinished Journey* I think it was, I mean I read it three decades ago and I don't remember it very well, but I remember him saying that a lot of things were very natural for him as a child, and then as a teenager, that sort of transition to becoming the adult musician, which a lot of child prodigies don't actually negotiate successfully, he realised that he had to somehow find a way to make these unconscious processes conscious, almost in order to secure them and safeguard them. Because what's intangible can potentially be lost, misplaced.

GD: Yes, it's very hard. Otherwise I suppose everyone would be a brilliant musician, if there wasn't something beyond what you could just learn with your brain somehow. And also, in *Piano Lessons*, the narrative through music: that story about the piece you were learning telling a story and you had to try and make up the story.

AG: I didn't quite get how that worked at first.

GD: I liked that passage. You didn't labour the point but you could see, right, she's not quite getting this.

AG: Yes, she says, 'We will work.'

GD: Yes, but harmony itself has narrative qualities, in almost any music, music that's not telling a story, not program music ...

AG: I guess the rules change when we leave the tonal system, but if we're in the tonal system we're talking about dissonance and consonance, we're talking about tension and resolution, and we're essentially talking about Aristotle's poetics, not just on a large formal level, about narrative and closure and so on – though it's absolutely there within sonata form, it operates according to those principles – but also at a sort of microscopic level. This is something I've been talking to my students about a lot more, and that's the meaning, or direction of a phrase, or the target of a phrase, and how most things in music are either going to somewhere or coming from somewhere, and just for them actually to have thought, where is this phrase going to?, rather than just a sound.

GD: Or this is a crescendo and this is a decrescendo.

AG: What is the destination? That brings their playing into so much more focus, and makes it so much more compelling. Whether that's a narrative quality, I suppose it depends on your definition of narrative.

GD: Yes, that's true. Yes, a musicologist I met a couple of months ago at a literary conference said that when she writes she writes in a musical form. So, this piece will be in sonata form or whatever. And I thought about it, and I thought the conference paper I was about to give was a theme and variations. But I'd never thought like that.

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AG: I think variations is a very interesting one, because there's something very static about variations, or circular. I mean, writing in sonata form. I guess it depends how literally you follow the laws of sonata form. I mean, basically what is sonata form? It's two ideas which are somewhat in opposition being presented, two protagonists or characters, some sort of tussle or conflict, and then a resolution that comes out of closure the one coming around to the other's tonal viewpoint. At a really basic level that's what it is. And that in a way is dramatic. That's a fundamental principle of drama. Drama is about conflict and resolution too. So I suppose it depends how painstaking one gets in the application of musical forms.

GD: I think actually if I started thinking about it and tried to do it, it would probably be quite contrived.

AG: I think it's kind of intuitive, probably, that when you are a musician and practise a lot of music, these things become more natural. I don't know, like you naturally do it, without having to impose that structure upon it artificially.

GD: You might look at it later and think, oh yes. But then I've also read an essay saying that Jane Austen's *Emma* is a fugue.

AG: In the sense that it's polyphonic?

GD: Yes, he actually maps where the first subject comes in and so on.

AG: I don't know how useful that is. I don't think Jane Austen actually sat down to write a fugue, and it might be kind of nice and interesting to try and be clever about it.

GD: It's sort of fun, but I don't really think that adds anything. And also how do you decide what is the subject? – you can't really map narrative onto musical forms that exactly.

AG: No I don't think you can. I mean, certain key principles apply, and I'm interested to hear that you've been working on this theme and variations thing, because the thing about variations – they're about the art of digression or speaking around a subject and offering multiple viewpoints on the same material.

GD: The only reason was that I was talking about a particular subject in each of Jane Austen's novels.

AG: That's interesting. What was the subject?

GD: The subject was courtship narratives. So, what is a courtship narrative, and let's have a look at each of the novels and test it against that. It's really irrelevant whether it's a theme and variations or not, but it's ...

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AG: Sometimes it's handy though just to have a framework for what you're writing.

GD: But it was very much after the fact that I thought of that, and it was only because of what Carol had said. That's by the bye, really. So what's like being written about, by your father?

AG: He hasn't really written about me that much.

GD: Well *Maestro* was ...

AG: That wasn't really about me, that was about my teacher. In a fictionalised world where she was teaching him, because the main character was really him, it was much more him than it was me.

GD: Yes, of course, and people used to say to him, 'when you learned the piano when you were a kid ...'

AG: Yes, that's right. So what's that like? Look, I feel that I've probably written about my family more ruthlessly than he has, so I'm not in a position to criticise. But at the time, and I've written about this in *Piano Lessons*, when I realised he was writing about Eleonora Sivan, I felt quite violated on her behalf rather than on my behalf, and I was fearful that she wouldn't be very happy about it. In the end she was so that was all fine.

GD: So with the boot on the other foot, the writing about the family? How do you negotiate that?

AG: How do I negotiate that? Yeah, I'm really happy to be trying to write some fiction now. It's hard. I think it's wrong to give yourself this lovely freedom that anything goes, and that the art is more important than the feelings. I think you don't want to be writing something looking over your shoulder all the time, thinking is this the official party line of the family, am I subscribing to a family myth, you want to be writing something that feels real, but then once you've written it, I don't think it hurts to show it to them and if they say I'm not comfortable with that I just think an ethical stance is honouring that. I'm not necessarily censoring everything. But it is a negotiation.

I don't really subscribe to the notion that the great writer gets to do whatever they want. I mean look at Knausgaard and the fallout of his *My Struggle* series. I think his wife was rehospitallised. It's tricky, because I read these books and I enjoy them. It's like Truman Capote, there was that film about him some years ago, in which it was revealed that when he was writing *In Cold Blood* he was very manipulative, and that the relationships he established with them were maybe a little bit dodgy, and on the one hand it's easy to get very judgemental – how dare he, he's a monster – and yet you're the one reading the book and you're enjoying it, so you're in a way complicit, so there's all of that. And yet on the other hand, I love my family, and I think the writer has a disproportionate amount of power and I

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think it's fundamentally utterly unfair because their version of events is the one that persists. I think Helen Garner maybe said you don't want to have a writer in the family. And I utterly understand that.

Now in relation to my Dad I don't feel that I need to be too sensitive, because he's made it open season.

GD: I can imagine it would be very difficult. It's not something I've ever done.

AG: It's really not a fair thing to do. Unless everybody's got the right of reply, or the right to then write their own versions.

GD: Which they have, I suppose.

AG: But they might not have the toolkit, they might not be writers.

GD: That's right. Well, what can you do?

AG: I just try to be honest and good and they don't always go together. Honest and kind, they don't always go together. When you sit down to the blank page your allegiance has to be to your version of the truth, otherwise it's pretty obvious when you're writing hagiography or sap. But I don't think it hurts afterwards to read it with a degree of sensitivity as to how it will be construed, and there are things you might put in that are true but might not be necessary to the overall book, so perhaps if they're going to hurt a family member, do they need to be there? That's the kind of tenuous position I've located for myself. It's not very clear, and subject to change.

GD: Can we talk about learning music versus learning writing?

AG: I have thought about that a bit, because it's a very different process. One of the great things about being a musician or learning music is that you have this relationship and it's a sort of institutionalised relationship and it's part of the process and it's mental – from an early age, and there's this adult who honours you by sitting in a room with you for an hour a day, from childhood, every week, that's incredible, and I was so blessed to have that. But being a writer, no one is doing that for you. And the way you learn to write seems to me by just reading everything, and I think probably I learned to write by watching my Dad's process, in a way. Even though it's not necessarily the same as mine, it gave me some insight into what it means to be a writer. But it was never that really specific. I used to proofread his stuff, and I used to edit his stuff, and I think that really helped me. But no one sort of sat me down every week and taught me how to be a writer for two hours.

GD: People who teach creative writing make the point that writing is a craft and so why shouldn't people be taught it.

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AG: And I suppose that's true. I mean, Les Murray said to me once – I was on a panel with him at the Melbourne Writers Festival talking about *Piano Lessons* – he said, 'if I had a teacher like that it would have saved me ten years.' So as a writer you teach yourself, basically figure it out yourself, and I guess you figure it out by going to the examples you like. Unless you're in a creative writing class and then you might get a short cut to some of these tools.

GD: Yes. I sometimes wonder whether you might learn rules that are not useful ... there's the 'show don't tell' rule, for example.

AG: Sometimes that goes too far, I feel. I don't mind a bit of exposition, once in a while, and yet there's this renunciation of exposition, which has become this basic, biblical, ten-commandment thing – and why? If you want all the writing to look a certain way, and everybody subscribe to the same rules, but every writer ... Maybe the same's true of playing the piano, I suppose, you get taught in a particular school, a particular way. Maybe it's more restrictive, a more rigorous enforcement of an aesthetic, when you have that intensity of that relationship. Probably. I guess, maybe one of things I like about writing is that it's a space where I have more freedom, maybe? I'm just wondering that. Though you develop your own taste. Yes, I agree, I don't think there's a set of rules for everybody. And sometimes I read a writer that I really admire, like Ian McEwan. I mean, he writes really well. I don't want to diss creative writing courses, but I can sense the craft behind it. There's something about it. I mean, I can sense the craft behind all the writers I admire too, but there's almost a painting by numbers thing about it, we're now going to write a novel and colour in all the bits perhaps brilliantly and naturalistically, and yet it feels to me a little bit ...

GD: I suppose the thing is that when you're playing, you're playing someone else's creation, aren't you?

AG: One of the challenges is tricking yourself and the audience into imagining that it's your own. And yet sitting here at the instrument, learning it, you have to approach it from a position of humility, trying to come to terms with their intention. And yet somehow, in my own practice of the two art forms, strangely it doesn't feel fundamentally different. It's almost as if the process of creating, or writing, at its best, like you were talking about with your poem the other day, it doesn't feel like you're making something up, it feels like you're hauling something in, and in that sense it's not that dissimilar to that. You're just trying to channel what that composer meant.

GD: I think there's almost a false dichotomy between creative and interpretive art. And I've kind of always felt, I'm not a creative artist, I do literary criticism, I perform music.

AG: Actually those two go together in a way, I think. Maybe as you say it is a false dichotomy, and yet I find a lot when I write – if I'm reviewing a book I feel the way I'm approaching it

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from the perspective of trying to have some sort of deep reading of it, or trying to x-ray it, is sort of what I do when I sit down with a score. I think Edward Said said that they were the same. But it's different – when you have to perform it you can't stop at the analysis and criticism, then you actually have to embody it, so then you have to take that out in a different way. But the actual process of study – I sort of feel that all these years of study, of immersing myself in this great repertoire has actually equipped me quite well for reviewing books, because it's a similar process of trying to come to grips with intention.

GD: It makes me think ... I mean, lately, my critical practice has become much more personal.

AG: Has it? Yes.

GD: And I was quite nervous about it at first, but now I'm finding that it's actually going over really well, and people are really liking it. And I'm still thinking, really? You want me to say I think this?

AG: Yes, all that academic training, it's kind of hard to come to terms with the first person, isn't it?

GD: It's interesting, because a lot of it is presentation, I'm the one who's standing out there saying 'I', and it's like a performance. In fact somebody said to me after I gave a paper recently, something about my performance, and it made me think that the two kinds of performance, musical and speaking, are linked.

AG: Yes I'm sure they are linked.

GD: Let's talk about *Welcome to your New Life*. I just loved that book.



AG: Thank you. I've got a soft spot for that book, because it hasn't done as well as *Piano Lessons*, and yet I'm very fond of it, partly because it reflects a part of my life that was very intense and special.

GD: OK, there are a million memoirs about that subject, but ...

AG: Well, there are some, but there are actually surprisingly not that many. I went into that subject pretty clueless. I couldn't find anything that in any way evoked what labour was really like. I knew it was some sort of pain, but I thought why doesn't anyone say actually what it is? It was just some sort of scary thing. I think you forget. So the moment after I gave birth I had my notebook out, because I thought my body is going to forget this. I need to remember. And there are memoirs about

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motherhood. Rachel Cusk did one, Anne Enright did one, and yet it's not really considered serious literary material. I think that's part of it. And if you write about it there's a sense that you're navel-gazing and it's women's work, and how is that of interest? Whereas I think I said at the time, that, my god, I was such a scholar of the male midlife crisis from an early age because every bloody man had written about it, and yet I didn't really have access to this realm of experience in a literary way.

GD: There is a real feeling that ... people say, this is a great book but we, unconsciously perhaps, put the memoirs about the wars and history and ...

AG: Serious man's stuff.

GD: ... over the women's memoirs.

AG: It really became clear to me with this that it was conceived as niche. And I approached this with literary aspirations, to write about this not just as some banal self-help volume or anything. I actually wanted to write something real and truthful and poetic. And it was tricky to write about it because it was such a fragmented type of experience. As I wrote the book it didn't have the clarity of *Piano Lessons*, which is a sort of *bildungsroman*, there are certain laws that it obeys, the coming of age. The thing about motherhood is that it's such a fractured experience, and half of it is comic and the other half is desperate, and within a day you'll traverse the extremes, and so you end up with this really bizarre kind of genre hybrid and I think that's the only thing that really does justice to the experience. But then, as you say, I felt that very clearly no-one knew where to put it in a book store. Does it go with the parenting? I wouldn't want to read that book if I were a new parent. It's not a parenting manual. What is it? And why is she writing about this banal thing of having a baby?

GD: And it's a normal baby!

AG: Yeah, how dare she, it doesn't have a disability ... all of that ... privileged, self-obsessed, upper middleclass white woman stuff. And I get that. But yet I do think that this is a fundamental aspect of human experience and we've celebrated so much of the other stuff – the war, the death, the womanising! The man stuff. Why can't we actually look at this in a way? And I do feel it didn't have the attention that I would have liked it to have had. People might say that's not the reason why but I really do feel that someone like Karl Ove Knausgaard write about his domestic experiences because he's a man it's suddenly groundbreaking. There's more sexism out there sometimes than we're prepared to acknowledge.

GD: I thought everything about that book was just wonderful. The conversations you're having with your friends, and they're waiting for you to get onto another subject but there is no other subject.

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AG: Yes, one does become obsessed. And boring. And probably the whole book is like an extension of that particular brand of boringness.

GD: But it's not one bit boring!

AG: I still find it interesting to kind of interrogate, to use an academic word, that whole aspect of being the boring, obsessed mother. And this really weird hierarchy that exists when it's so clear that your child is just the best thing in the world – you tolerate other people talking about their children so you can return to the only subject that counts, which is your child, and just this sort of monomania that possesses you. Now that my boys are a bit older, they're seven and four, I'm probably still a pretty obsessive mum, but I can actually talk about other things, but when Reuben was a newborn, and I wanted to keep on writing, and it seemed obvious to me that there was only one subject I could write about, as there was only really one subject I was thinking about and that was him. And I probably am more obsessive than other mothers, but I think motherhood particularly of an infant has to be a sort of obsession because they're so vulnerable, and I'm sure it's just the design.

GD: I just think it's a wonderful book and I will keep coming back to it and reading it. And the crying school!

AG: I was telling Reuben about it last week when I dropped him at school, because I had been talking about it to people in San Francisco, and I was telling him about how I had to leave him in the cot, and how I took him out of it and hid him in the bedroom, and he thought that was very funny.

GD: Is there anything else that you want to say about being a musical writer?

AG: I think the processes are not entirely different. I think that interpreting a piece of music and sculpting a piece of prose are in some ways a similar thing. In one way you're having to concern yourself with the overall structure, and you're having to concern yourself with talking about the flow which is every sentence singing, and for me is a double-sided approach, trying to approach it from within and without. And you want the phrases to carry you through and you want the sentences to carry you through, but you also want the overall thing to have some kind of stature. And I think maybe that's something I learned from music that I apply in my writing, that structural sense. I'm actually very interested in form. I'm really interested in formal processes in music and ... I read some Alice Munro stories recently, and my god she's a master. And trying to analyse what she does formally was really interesting. Because I have always just been consumed by them, but actually trying to figure out how she does it, and how she puts it all together was fascinating.

So I think in terms of the resonances between the two crafts there is that larger structural formal thing, and I think on the more sort of microscopic level there are all those concerns that we were speaking about that are musical concerns, and they are rhythm,

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they're cadence, they are modulation; modulating from one paragraph to the next, coming in with a new tone of voice. That's not necessarily something conscious, but it's something that you feel.

And then by extension, if I'm working with a piece of Beethoven or Schubert or whatever, I think a lot of the laws of grammar and punctuation come into it. And one thing I find with my students is they just don't punctuate in their performances, so they lose the language, particularly when we're talking about those classical masters. And I'll often say to them, well is that a comma, is that a full stop, is that a semi-colon, is that a colon? Because it could be all of those things. And when they have a rest I find it useful to say to them, the psychology of the rest is really dramatically important to any piece of music. It's not just empty space. And the rest needs to be either infused with shock after some sort of statement, or suspense, or what type of rest is it? And sometimes the best way to find out what kind of rest it is, I've found recently, is to say, is that an exclamation mark before it, or is it a question mark? And you hear the rest differently if it's after a question or after an exclamation. So I find it useful to bring a lot of those notions of punctuation and grammar over to music, and I also find, I suppose, in a more intuitive way, I bring those musical processes over to prose. That's probably the way I try to work it.

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